

Purchasing Beef by the Quarter for the First Time

If you've never purchased beef by the quarter, it's important to understand how the process works. It's not the same as buying a pound of meat from the grocery. In fact, it can seem like a confusing and strange system at first. However, it's historically how all local processors do it. It saves the butcher time and, in the end, saves the customer money over buying meat sold by the pound in a retail setting. So, here we go. Let me know if you get confused so we can try rewriting those portions.

There are two factors that will determine the cost to you. The first is the *hanging weight* of the steer. After the steer is killed, skinned and the innards are removed, the carcass is weighed. This weight is the *hanging weight*. The *hanging weight* is eventually divided by four to create the *hanging weight of a quarter*.

Your purchase price is based on the hanging weight of the quarter. After weighing, the carcass is hung in cold storage for 7 to 10 days to allow the meat to season.

After 7-10 days, the meat is processed by first cutting the steer in half the long way. Each half is processed into the various cuts and then the cuts from a particular half are divided equally to create two *quarters*. So, within any given quarter, there will be cuts from both the front portion of the steer (e.g. chuck roast) and the rear portion of the steer (e.g. sirloin). The various cuts can be processed according to your specifications when ordering. For example, you can ask the butcher to make all the round steak into hamburger if you don't care for round steak.

During processing there is significant "waste" (bone and fat) that is removed. The waste is around 27% on a lean grass fed animal. (A fatter, corn fed steer will have about 35% waste.) For example, if the *hanging weight* of the quarter is 200 lbs., the final weight of the quarter after processing could be around 150 lbs.. We know this from experience. The butcher does not actually weigh the final product. In fact, if you ask how many pounds of meat you're getting when you pick it up, they will only have an approximate figure because the final product has not been weighed. If you're sharing a quarter with someone else, having a scale available can make it easier to divide up the meat. Even a simple bathroom scale would allow you to weigh two boxes with the various cuts distributed fairly evenly between them.

The second factor that will determine your cost is your particular cutting instructions. The basic processing fee will include the normal array of steaks, roasts, hamburger, soup bones, etc. Beyond the basic processing fee, there can be extra costs for things like making beef brats or tenderizing various cuts. The butcher will ask you for cutting instructions before the meat is processed.

So here's an example of how the whole thing works. The prices used are from 2011.

Let's pretend you call on September 15th and say, "I'd like a quarter of beef." We say, "Great! We are taking steers for slaughter on November 1st and the meat will be ready for pick up by November 15th. Please send us a non-refundable deposit of \$100.00 with your name, address and phone number to hold your order."

After the check is received, we confirm the order. Sometime before the slaughter date (Nov. 1st), you call the butcher and they ask you several questions about how you would like the meat cut.

The steer is taken for slaughter on November 1st and after humane slaughter it is skinned, cleaned, weighed and hung in cold storage for about 7-10 days. This is important for good meat quality. It turns out, the hanging weight of the steer is 800 lbs. So, the hanging weight of a quarter from this animal is 200 lbs. This is the weight that your purchase is based on. We e-mail you an invoice for the total due to Prairie Bluff Farm. (200 lbs. X \$3.25 = \$650.00 - \$100.00 deposit = \$550.00). You send us a check for \$550.00 before picking up the meat. In the meantime, the meat is processed into all the various cuts according to your specific instructions.

On Nov. 14th the butcher calls Prairie Bluff Farm and says, "The meat is ready!" . We then notify you and you may receive a call from the butcher as well. The next day, or soon after, you go off to the butcher to pay for and receive your beef. The butcher says the hanging weight of your quarter was 200 lbs. They charge 50 cents a pound for processing and a \$12.50 per quarter standard slaughtering fee. That totals

\$112.50 in butchering charges which includes all the standard cuts and the balance made into hamburger. Since, in this example, you decided not to do any additional tenderizing or have specialty items made this is the total cost for processing. You write a check to the butcher for \$112.50.

While lugging three 24" X 16" X 8" boxes out to your car, you ask the butcher, "How many pounds of meat is this anyway?" and they say "I don't know, we don't weigh the final product. For grass fed beef it will be about 25 -30% less than the hanging weight". You then ask, "What percentage is hamburger and what percentage is steaks." They say, " It varies with every animal. We strive to get the highest percentage possible of nicer cuts and the balance is made into burger."

When you get home, you get on your bathroom scale and weigh yourself. Then you stand on the scale with each box of meat, carefully deducting your weight and writing down the results. You find that you actually received about 144 lbs. of meat. So the pencil and calculator go to work again. Let's see, $\$112.50 + \$100.00 + \$550.00 = \762.50 . $\$762.50 / 144\text{lbs.} = \$5.30/\text{lb}$ for all the various cuts from hamburger to roasts to porter house steaks.

Next you think, "I hope I have room for this in the freezer". You go downstairs to your freezer in the dungeon and clear out a bunch of homemade applesauce that says "Fall 1979" on the bags. Doing this creates an 18" X 18" X 24" space (4.5 cubic feet) and "whew!" it fits.

I hope this helps!

Steve,

Pasture Patterns Beef from Prairie Bluff Farm